Emerging and Advancing:

Intentional Assessment as a Tool for Shared Evolution Between Teacher and Student

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"Wow, music teaching in the COVID year, huh? Good luck with that," someone said.

"You're going to… what… sanitize all your instruments after you use them? Those are going to be some dirty recorders!" Another chimed.

"You're the new music teacher…? That's got to be the hardest class to teach during the pandemic. Can you even do that?" One fellow teacher laughed.

These were a few of the remarks I received before the 2020-2021 school year from a handful of colleagues who felt compelled to express their well-intentioned concerns around masked, elementary musicianship. I chuckled along with them, shrugging in general agreement. Admittedly, I entered the school year with high hopes around the creative and developmental potential of my eleven socially-distanced, masked K-6 music classes. But in the moment, I wasn't inclined to climb atop my soap box and readily adopt the identity of The New Music Teacher Who Uncomfortably Confronted the Widely Misconstrued Notions of Music Education During Week One On The Job Amidst The Global Pandemic (*It's not all just* recorders*, Steve,* he said through the KN95.)

Even as a first-year music teacher (pandemics aside) I was prepared to engage with some of those traditional challenges, and to my luck, my administration and school community has been widely supportive of arts education since September, including the tech-heavy music curriculum I proposed over the summer.

One of the strange benefits about being a first-year teacher during such an unprecedented moment in music education is, well, *every* teacher is a first-year teacher. The multi-colored rugs that previously welcomed students to their regular Morning Meetings were stripped from the floor and replaced with distanced desks. High fives, fist bumps, and hugs require touch-free alternatives. And large community gatherings for music, song, and celebration have relocated

into Zoom Rooms. While these descriptions paint a glum picture of loss, I've managed to find some liberation in the music classroom amid the restrictions.

In other words, the coronavirus pandemic mandated me to practice what I preached in my student-teaching and academic graduate essays: "come on, kids, just be *creative!* Is that so hard? Just think outside the *box!*" For better or for worse, that box (for students and educators alike) is a thousand miles in the rearview. 8In thinking about that "box," Mark Hudson comes to mind in his research paper, "Assessment in music education: a Colorado perspective." In describing the unique role of music educators as cultivators of creativity within children, they write:

> We consider ourselves and our subject area important and vital to the education of the whole child, as we are of the "creative" disciplines. In reality, the majority of what we do in our profession is "re-creative"; constantly striving to have our students obtain the capabilities necessary to perform the music we choose. Creativity is, more often than not, stifled, as we insist on "getting it right", implying there is only one way to correctly perform a particular work or passage (Hudson, 234)

This concept of "re-creative" teaching and learning illuminates a certain narrow-mindedness that tends to prevail in music education. It is challenging enough for a music teacher of any age to challenge a traditional music learning atmosphere (one from which they were presumably groomed as students themselves) and intellectually conceptualize the possibilities of fostering a student-centered creative environment, much less actually implement the creative (as opposed to "re-creative") teaching practices in their music classroom. Interestingly, these traps of "correctness" may also contribute to the aforementioned misconceptions around music education more generally, and both students and teachers can fall prey to such a conventional expectation of assessment.

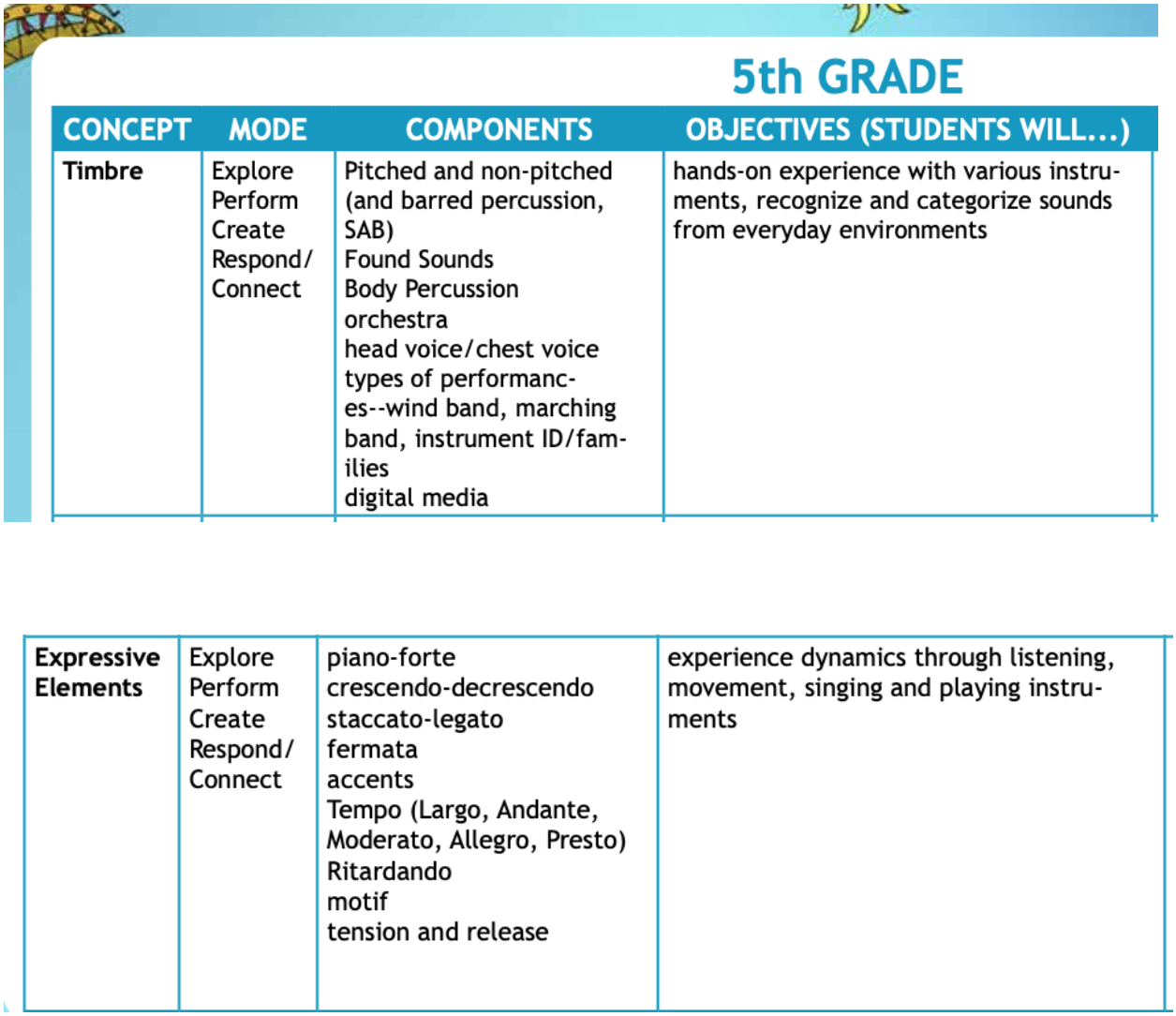
I can relate to the yearning for control that occasionally accompanies the encouragement of student creativity (*be creative, and definitely think outside the box, but you know, don't forget*

to incorporate W, X, Y, and Z as well) for the sake of delivering on standards and report cards. In my short experience as a music educator, this challenge has been particularly salient within the context of student composition.

In this essay, I want to explore the question, "How might a music educator create a learning assessment that measures student growth without stymying both the students' and teacher's aesthetic passion and purpose?" With that query in mind, I want to examine a specific assessment tool (a rubric) that I devised and piloted to measure student (and consequently teacher) growth as it connects to a set of state standards. In particular, I will explore the pedagogical relationale surrounding the rubric. In addition, I'll reflect on the long-winded project development process itself, including three rubric revisions (each of which was inspired, to some extent, by academic research), ongoing in-class and informal assessments of student learning, and a feedback session from our cohort of graduate educators. While the project is ongoing in the classroom, I have gathered sufficient data to analyze and assess a certain degree of student growth over time and as well as my own growth as an educator, particularly within this content area. Finally, I'll reflect and make recommendations for similar assessments moving forward. Similarly, I'll use this experience to evaluate my own evolving reliability as an assessor with relationship to curriculum and instruction.

As a Jewish Day School, my school isn't explicitly accountable to a set of state-based elementary music standards, but we adopted Music First and Music First Junior (a cloud-based music learning, creation, assessment, sharing, and exploration tool) as a primary elementary music curriculum, which coincides with the Massachusetts educational music standards. To guide a culminating project on expressive elements and timbre, the standards in question are

below. (Note that the standards for 4th and 5th grade are comparable enough for both sets of students to benefit from the same project. The standards below specifically are for 5th grade.)



5th GRADE

CONCEPT	MODE	COMPONENTS	OBJECTIVES (STUDENTS WILL...)
Timbre	Explore Perform Create Respond/ Connect	Pitched and non-pitched (and barred percussion, SAB) Found Sounds Body Percussion orchestra head voice/chest voice types of performanc-es--wind band, marching band, instrument ID/fam-ilies digital media	hands-on experience with various instru-ments, recognize and categorize sounds from everyday environments
Expressive Elements	Explore Perform Create Respond/ Connect	piano-forte crescendo-decrescendo staccato-legato fermata accents Tempo (Largo, Andante, Moderato, Allegro, Presto) Ritardando motif tension and release	experience dynamics through listening, movement, singing and playing instru-ments

While I've had the unique opportunity to be physically present with students during the COVID-19 pandemic, the music classroom is certainly not typical. Students must remain distanced, the state of MA has prohibited indoor singing, and any instruments must be sanitized before and after use. It has been a unique challenge to meet the above standards with the COVID caveats in mind. Despite limited modality, my teaching tools have included: frontward facing instruction, Google slides, physical flashcards, individual student whiteboards, listening

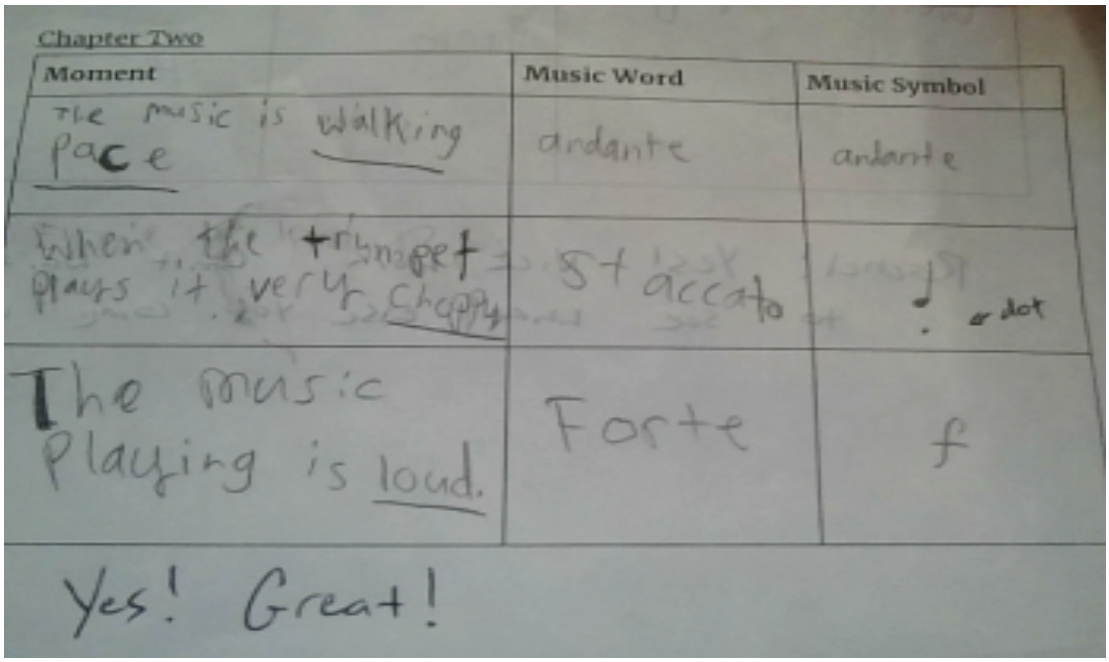
exercises using a bluetooth speaker, student worksheets, student chromebooks (for digital media), and original video.

One particular tool that students were verbally excited about was to play several pieces from popular music to display examples of dynamics, tempo, and articulation. Songs included Intentions (Justin Bieber), Wait For It (Hamilton), and Only Human (Jonas Brothers.) This struck me as a unique way to evoke prior knowledge (perhaps without students even recognizing that it was prior knowledge.) We returned to the same songs over a number of weeks and students were able to recall previous conversations as well as contribute new ideas about the dynamics, tempo, and articulations at play. In another class period, students partnered up and used whiteboards to respond to T.D.A. based trivia questions in a game show style format.

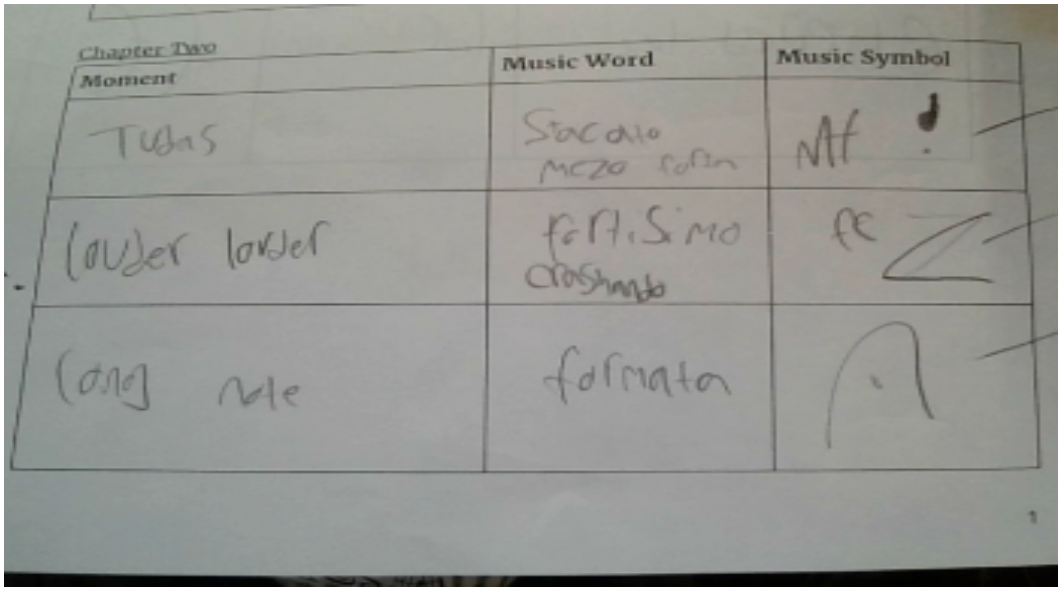
Perhaps the most interesting and well-received modality that aided my teaching (and eventually gave birth to the final project) was original storytelling and video production. Over several weeks, I wrote and recorded a series of 1-2 minute stories with subtle examples of dynamics, tempo, and articulation weaved in throughout the plot. Students were asked to identify moments in the story that directly related to our expressive elements vocabulary. For example, in one story, a character named Ernie, a mouse who lives in the wall of a Boston apartment, overhears the resident's footsteps moving closer and closer to his nook behind the stove. As the footsteps get closer, the sound gets *louder and louder.* Soon after, the mouse overhears the resident of the apartment playing a *very loud* tuba. While the story nudged students in a particular direction with their responses (*crescendo* and *fortissimo* for those particular examples) it was gratifying to observe how students were able to draw their own conclusions.

Most students were highly engaged by the stories themselves (as evidenced by their independent work) and many students would inquire about future stories (the Ernie story was

told in three chapters. Here is a video example.) In addition to high levels of engagement, they were eager to display their learning on a worksheet. Below are two examples of outstanding student work that clearly revealed their understanding of the expressive elements.



Rachel, Grade 4



Amiel, Grade 5

These two examples, of course, don't tell the whole story. (One student submitted a worksheet that was filled entirely with question marks and blank spaces.) Overall, the preliminary worksheets offered an opportunity for me to assess how students were grappling with the material as well as consider how to move forward in the curriculum. In progressing towards a culminating independent project, I asked students to use a familiar digital music tool called Groovy Music to compose their own soundtrack to a video story of their choice (either one that we had already watched or an outside YouTube video that I had to approve.) Drawing from their experience with the worksheet and video storytelling, I hoped for students to connect moments from their chosen video story to an original soundtrack using expressive elements vocabulary to guide their creative process.

Before creating a rubric for the final project, I created a model version of the expectation and presented it to students. This included a model soundtrack as well as a model T.D.A. form, a snippet of which is below:

Name: Mr. Tracey Date: 11/19/2020

Taa-Daa Sheet (T.D.A. Sheet)

Soundtrack Title: WHAT'S THAT?!
Story chosen: Ernie's Story - Chapter 1

Dynamics

Measure Number	Dynamic and Symbol	Explanation
1	Mezzo piano *mp*	The beginning of the story is relaxed and quiet. Ernie is just living his life with no distractions.
5 and 6	Pianissimo *pp*	When Ernie goes out to eat the old lady's cheese he needs to be very quiet.
7	Fortissimo *ff*	ALERT! SOMEONE IS IN THE HOUSE!
9 - 10	Forte *f*	The footsteps get closer and the squeaky step above Ernie's BOINGS loudly
13 - 16	Piano *p*	Ernie trembles quietly and afraid in his bed, wondering what the new footsteps mean

I should note that the idea of the soundtrack project came to mind one weekday morning while pouring my morning coffee; it began as an entirely undeveloped and impractical idea. However, having presented a model to students, it became more natural to consider what additional student (and teacher) learning was necessary before creating a "final" display of knowledge. Thus, with the model in mind, I moved towards the development of the rubric.

In creating the rubric, I borrowed primarily from Bernard and Hammel's article, "Good Teaching on Steroids: Assessments of Music Teaching and Learning with students on the Autism Spectrum." While the article is geared towards educators that work alongside students with special needs, it would behoove music educators with students across demographics to implement a certain level of intentionality towards their teaching and assessment. They write, "Effective assessment of the music learning of students with autism calls on the practices, strategies, and approaches of effective assessment. By magnifying, deepening, broadening, and further personalizing them, music educators can gain a deeper understanding of what their students with autism know and can do in the music classroom and ensemble" (Bernard et al, 83.) The depth of assessment or approach will look different in any music classroom, however it is valuable to consider that *all* students benefit from a broad standard of evaluation. This sentiment also brings to mind the Assessment Bill of Rights, which asserts that "all students are entitled to… multiple and varied opportunities to display and document their achievement and options in tests that allow them to play their strengths" (28.) I'm heartened by the educational philosophy that students are entitled to thrive in ways that work for them, and of course, if assessments are meant to measure growth, surely they are meant to lend themselves to students' strengths as well. My rubric (and the project more generally) attempts to offer students voice and choice with their video-story selection as well as offer creative autonomy with their soundtrack.

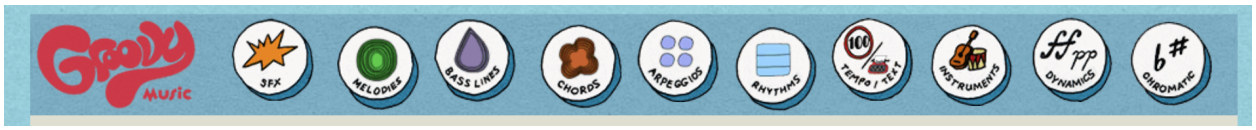
Rubric: Draft One (intentionally unfinished)

	Proficient	**Accomplished**	**Advanced**
Music Vocabulary Components - Composition	The composition is at least 16 measures and includes three dynamics, two tempos, and three articulations	The composition is at least sixteen measures and includes four dynamics, three tempos, and four articulations	The student's composition is at least sixteen measures and uses five or more dynamics, all four tempos, and five articulations to animate the piece. The composition animatedly tells the story of the chosen scene
Music Vocabulary Components - Explanation	The write-up demonstrates an understanding of the each of the dynamics/tempo/articulation vocabulary and a clear connection to the chosen scene	The write-up demonstrates an accomplished understanding of the relationship between the composition and the chosen scene. There is an understanding of the emotional depth of the scene	The write-up demonstrates advanced comprehension of vocab words and makes creative connections between the dynamics, tempo, and articulations in the composition and their chosen scene
Groovy Music Components	The composition uses 3 melodies, 3 rhythms, 2 different instruments,	The composition uses	The composition

Rubric: Draft Two (version presented to our class)

	Approaching Proficiency	**Proficiency**	**Accomplished**	**Advanced**
Musical Vocabulary: Tempo, Dynamics, and Articulations (T.D.A.)	The soundtrack includes one or fewer dynamics, tempos, and articulations. The symbols are incorrect.	The soundtrack includes two correctly labeled dynamics, one tempo, and an articulation to animate the piece	The soundtrack composition includes three correctly labeled dynamics, two tempos, and two articulations to animate the piece	The soundtrack uses four or more correctly labeled dynamics, three or more tempos, and three or more articulations to animate the piece
Connecting a Story's Plot to Music: T.D.A. (*TaaDaa)* Form	The TaaDaa form includes T.D.A. connections that are vague. The connections lack detail and it's generally unclear if the student understands the T.D.A. vocab	The TaaDaa form demonstrates a clear understanding of the musical vocabulary. The T.D.A. form logically connects the musical vocab to the plot of the story.	The TaaDaa form not only demonstrates understanding of the vocabulary, but takes creative liberties to connect the musical soundtrack to the plot of the story.	The TaaDaa form demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the story and musical vocabulary. The T.D.A. form makes multiple creative connections between the soundtrack and the content of the story. The personality of the story aligns with the soundtrack!
Music Technology: Groovy Music Composition	The soundtrack is less than 16 measures and incorporates two or fewer Groovy Components	The soundtrack is at least 16 measures and incorporates three Groovy Components	The soundtrack is at least 16 measures and incorporates four Groovy Components	The soundtrack is at least 16 measures and incorporates a creative and intentional assortment of four or more Groovy Components

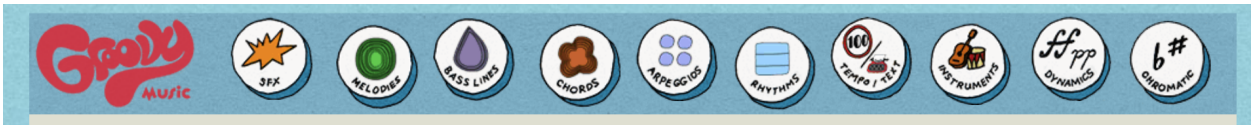
Groovy Components: special effects, melodies, bass lines, chords, arpeggios, rhythms, and instruments (7)



Rubric: Draft 3 (close to final draft)

	Emerging - you're getting there	**Proficient -** you understand the terms	**Accomplished -** you are a composer!	**Advanced -** WOW, you have told the story through music!
Musical Vocabulary: Tempo, Dynamics, and Articulations (T.D.A.)	The soundtrack includes one or fewer dynamics, tempos, and articulations. The symbols are incorrect.	The soundtrack includes two correctly labeled dynamics, one tempo, and an articulation to animate the piece	The soundtrack composition includes three correctly labeled dynamics, two tempos, and two articulations to animate the piece	The soundtrack uses four or more correctly labeled dynamics, three or more tempos, and three or more articulations to animate the piece
Connecting a Story's Plot to Music: T.D.A. (*TaaDaa)* Form	The TaaDaa form includes T.D.A. connections that are vague. The connections lack detail and it's generally unclear if the student understands the T.D.A. vocab	The TaaDaa form demonstrates a clear understanding of the musical vocabulary. The explanation section clearly connects the vocabulary to the story.	The TaaDaa form demonstrates understanding of the vocabulary. The explanation section makes 2-3 creative connections between the vocab and the story.	The TaaDaa form demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the story and musical vocabulary. The explanation section is packed with emotional and creative substance.
Music Technology: Groovy Music Composition	The soundtrack is less than 16 measures and incorporates two or fewer Groovy Components	The soundtrack is at least 16 measures and incorporates three Groovy Components	The soundtrack is at least 16 measures and incorporates four Groovy Components	The soundtrack is 16 measures or more and incorporates a creative and intentional assortment of four or more Groovy Components

Groovy Components: special effects, melodies, bass lines, chords, arpeggios, rhythms, and instruments (7)



To a certain degree, these three rubrics tell one story of my ongoing evolution as an assessor and educator. As mentioned previously, one area of concern was that an overproduced rubric might stymie students' creative tendencies in their composition. The rubric is certainly a tool for an assessor, and it is also a project guide for students, but for a project like this, one might hope that it doesn't serve as *too* much of a dictating force. In his piece "Authentic

Assessment in Music Composition: Feedback that Facilitates Creativity," Daniel Deutsch investigates this conundrum,

> Many students will reverse-engineer their music to fulfill the rubric superficially rather than reaching deeper for more profound meaning. When students heed the call of the rubric rather than their own creative passion, the composition becomes less purposeful and meaningful and therefore less musical. Indeed, the students' notion of what the composition *is* may become distorted and much less attractive to them. Is it a performance task (schoolwork) where they must supply at least one example of each criterion, or is it a mastery task (real art) where they grow skill through aesthetic passion and purpose? Which model will make students more likely to create attractive music? (56)

Deutch's "reverse-engineer" phrasing evokes Hudson's "re-create" language. Should students' creative work be attractive to *students* or attractive to the *educator?* Perhaps both? But perhaps primarily to the student. The chief purpose of the soundtrack project in particular is for students to utilize the expressive elements as tools to emphasize certain parts of the story, and the composition/soundtrack itself on Groovy Music is more of a secondary outcome. With that said, the invitation for students to *create* a piece of music, particularly since many of them are eager to use chromebooks and explore digital music, cultivates a sense of ownership in their work as opposed to simply filling out a worksheet (as creative as the worksheet might be.) My hope is that a student's soundtrack will be ongoing and saved in the cloud through a number of class periods, which adds an extra layer of student autonomy that awakens a creative process and boosts student growth and purpose. In a similar conversation, Deutsch adds, "The idea that a composition is in flux and malleable enhances progress because it reduces self-judgmental trepidation and anxiety" (57.) The more students are able to recognize creative assignments as beneficial for their own aesthetic growth, the less likely they will be to judge themselves for the sake of a grade.

Student feedback of my abilities as an educator has been apparent through the exercise (whether I asked for it explicitly or not.) After I initially revealed the model TDA form and model composition, for example, I was under the impression that the entire class was ready to hit the ground running with their compositions and TDA forms the following period. However, once I distributed blank TDA forms to each student, it was clear they were very confused about how to move forward. (Only one student out of fifteen actually wrote anything on their TDA form that period.) It was a lot to expect of them to simultaneously compose, recall the details from their chosen video, *and* keep track of the TDA form. In future rubrics and projects, it will be fruitful to move more intentionally and keep it simple.

It was invaluable to also receive feedback from my BoCo at Berklee colleagues. When one classmate opined that some of the language in the rubric might be too complicated for 4th and 5th grade students, I caught myself thinking, *yeah, well the rubric is mostly for my own understanding and evaluation of students, anyway.* The irony here, of course, is that the rubric should of course be geared towards student need and student understanding! In my third draft, I was intentional to shift some of the language so that 4th and 5th graders (and I) have a clearer understanding of what is "proficient," what is "accomplished," and what is "advanced." Another colleague voiced that some of the language was not only too complicated, but vague and unclear. Admittedly, there *is* a part of me that simply wants to go with the flow and evaluate each composition/TDA form as it comes: *I'll just follow my gut and see if I'm impressed or not with the student's work, or maybe I'll see if it makes me feel good, and then I'll mark the rubric from there.* As tempting of a strategy that may be, and maybe even as legitimate as it may be from some creative standpoints (that's how we informally evaluate art all the time), it's not fair to

students who are using the rubric as a guide for their work, and it's the educator's job to provide students with clear and concise expectations.

Clarity of expectations offers both students and teachers an opportunity to self-evaluate along the way, as well as at the end of the process. Student and teacher learning is certainly not static; growth is readily available each step of the way, and it can (and should) be regularly measured. But it should not be measured for the sake of a child pointing at a piece of paper to say, "I got an A in 4th grade general music." Both student and teacher growth should be measured in the interest of purposeful work and the belief that what we do in the music classroom together is intrinsically valuable. In her piece, "Measuring Music Education: A Philosophical Investigation of the Model Cornerstone Assessments," Lauren K. Richerme writes, "Understanding not just measurement but existence as intra-active means that when a teacher measures and assess[es] student learning, both teacher and student alter" (23.) Indeed, learning assessments are not "fixed." The evolution of teachers and students alike are interdependent, and there is great value in focusing close attention on the processes that empower each to continue to "become" as music learners.